

Integrity, Commitment, and a Coherent Self

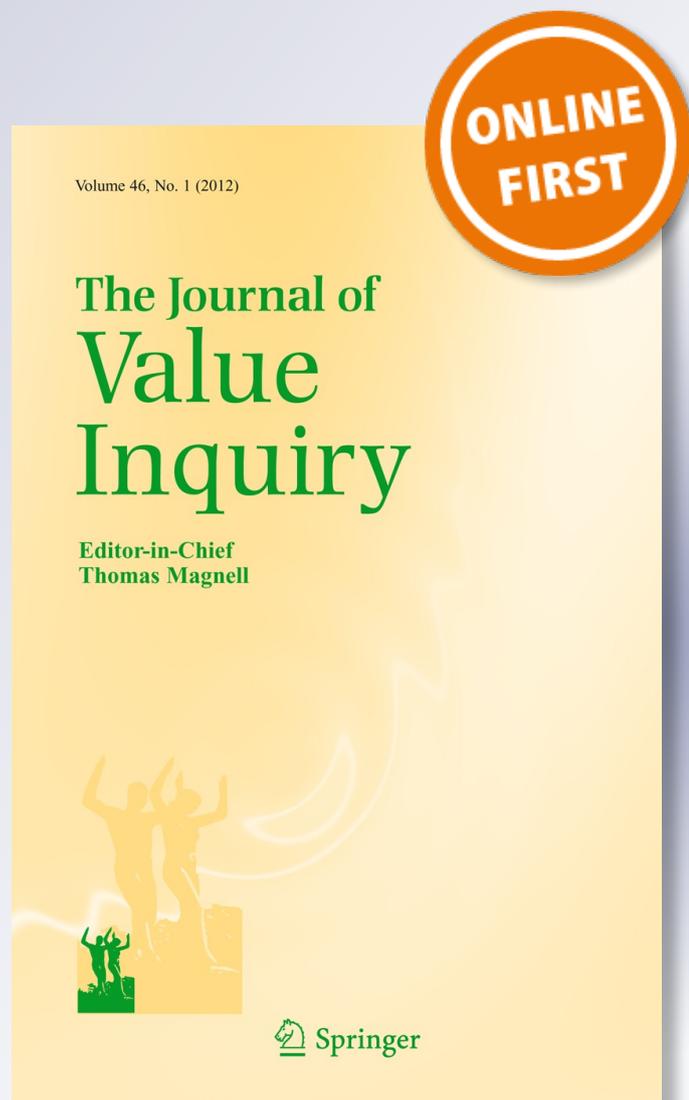
Warren J. von Eschenbach

The Journal of Value Inquiry

ISSN 0022-5363

J Value Inquiry

DOI 10.1007/s10790-012-9346-9



Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Science +Business Media Dordrecht. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your work, please use the accepted author's version for posting to your own website or your institution's repository. You may further deposit the accepted author's version on a funder's repository at a funder's request, provided it is not made publicly available until 12 months after publication.

Integrity, Commitment, and a Coherent Self

Warren J. von Eschenbach

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2012

1 A Preliminary Characterization of Integrity

Integrity is important for our understanding of what it means to possess a constituted and coherent self. Many discussions of integrity are focused on relationships among moral principles and virtues. Philosophers pay less attention to any relationship that integrity might have to practical agency or personal identity, and as a result, fail to appreciate the special relation integrity has to the constitution of a coherent self. Central to integrity are considerations about self-identity and agency, because it is through ongoing and deliberate activities that reflect the type of person someone wishes to identify with that a person constitutes self-identity and agency in a coherent manner. An individual who holds haphazard values, engages in little reflection on the type of person she identifies with, or puts minimal effort in acting according to principles has not constituted a coherent self. A self is coherent insofar as the activities and principles of an agent are integrated into a consistent whole. When the relationship between integrity and a coherent self is properly understood, it becomes clear that the moral content of integrity is thin and that the approbation usually associated with a person of integrity stems not from judgments about convictions or principles, but from the relationship between actions and commitments.

Two features of integrity and its relation to self-identity and agency are salient. A coherent self must be integrated in the sense that the parts are assimilated into a whole. Ideally, to be a whole, the parts must be consistent and cohere. A person who is at times fair-minded and evenhanded in dealing with other people and is at other times unpredictably capricious and cruel would not qualify as a person who has integrity or an integrated self. A coherent self also is constituted to the extent that an individual identifies with the integrated elements. A person of integrity adheres to

W. J. von Eschenbach (✉)
University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, USA
e-mail: wvonesch@nd.edu

principles and commitments not accidentally or nonchalantly, but in a manner that informs her self-identity. Who we are is largely determined by what we choose to value and how we subsequently choose to act, and the commitments we hold most dear are the commitments with which we want to identify. We will consider a hybrid of what Chesire Calhoun calls the integrated-self view and the identity view of integrity as an account of integrity.¹

According to Calhoun, advocates of the integrated-self view require that a person unify the parts of his self into a whole in order to have integrity, while advocates of the identity view characterize integrity as having a character with which a person strongly identifies and to which he remains true. The conception of a self that Jean-Paul Sartre advances can be helpful for understanding integrity. Because there is no teleological basis that determines what a human being is or what the purpose of a person might be, according to Sartre, a person delineates his self through ongoing, deliberate actions. We anticipate the future and deliberately constitute our identity through present and future intended actions. We are not simply what we conceive ourselves to be, but are, according to Sartre, “nothing else but that which [we] make of [ourselves].”² We are what we will and affirm in the sense that a human subject creates himself by choosing to act according to an “image of man such as he believes he ought to be” so “to affirm the value of that which is chosen.”³

Self-identity is a matter of choice and an ongoing activity requiring long-term commitment. We determine who we are by identifying ourselves with certain values and by engaging in behaviors that typify or embody them. A person who wishes to be honest will express her commitment to honesty by acting in a certain manner and will not engage in activities contrary to the corresponding values. If an individual wishes to be a caring and sympathetic person, she will treat others accordingly and will try to minimize any mean-spirited or callous tendencies. In either case, a person identifies with principles and values through deliberate actions. Because a self endures through time, on this view, self-identity is also an ongoing activity and long-term commitment to the values with which we wish to identify. If we are to constitute a self that is identical through time, the “identity-conferring activities” must have temporal extension, and to choose a same self over time, in the absence of sufficient reason to abandon commitments, an individual must remain committed to the same ideals throughout time.⁴ Activities relevant to self-identity will be activities a person continues to engage in and pursue in the future. A person who wishes to identify herself as an honest person will recognize that in order to identify herself with the value of honesty through time she must remain committed to being honest and continue to act in a way consistent with that value. Consistency is a relevant aspect of integrity in the sense that a person must act in a constant fashion over time in order to constitute a self that is identical through time. Furthermore, to maintain self-identity, a person must act in a manner consistent with her principles

¹ See Chesire Calhoun, “Standing for Something,” *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XCII, no. 5, May, 1995.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” in *Existentialism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York: Random House Editions, 1974), p. 198.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Lynn McFall, “Integrity,” *Ethics*, 98, October 1987, p. 13.

and values, whereas to act in a manner inconsistent with her identity-conferring values would do damage to the ideal type of person she wishes to become.

Coherence is another type of consistency necessary for an integrated self. Certain commitments are implied by other similar commitments. The set of principles an individual adopts must not be in conflict, but must be consistent with each other to constitute a coherent self. If John wishes to be a caring and sympathetic person, he must not mistreat others, and in not mistreating others he must respect their autonomy and not deceive them for personal gain. John must be an honest person in order to be a caring one. The same is true for a number of different principles, though some principles, as well as the activities that embody them, might be in conflict with other principles. Self-determination or autonomy, for example, can easily be in conflict with obedience and actions required by obedience. To create a coherent self, a person must therefore adopt a consistent set of identity-conferring principles and act accordingly. This constraint on what principles an individual may conjointly adopt is expressly related to the notion of integrity as an integrated self.

Identity-conferring commitments can have far-reaching implications in other areas of life, and in some cases, might conflict. Bernard Williams offers an example to illustrate this.⁵ George, a chemist who is strongly opposed to biological warfare, is offered a job to conduct research in chemical and biological warfare to support his family. If George accepts the job, he risks losing integrity because his opposition to biological warfare cannot possibly be an isolated commitment. If it were, George would be what Gabrielle Taylor calls “shallowly sincere,” and we should follow her in denying such persons the ascription of integrity.⁶ As Taylor maintains, the commitment of George against biological warfare must be related to his more general views about how we must treat others and how he views other parts of his life, such as the values he wants to impart to his children. If he accepts the job and wishes his principles and actions to remain consistent, then he will have to reassess his values, otherwise he will not be able to express his beliefs consistently in all areas of his life and will lose integrity as a result.

George exemplifies a type of consistency that is necessary for any notion of integrity. Identity-conferring commitments and principles must hang together, in the sense that they must cohere. It would be contrary to common notions of integrity if a person were to compartmentalize his principles and to ignore potential implications in other areas of life, especially because subsequent tendencies for self-deception, hypocrisy, and inconsistency between ideals and actions would be too great. Furthermore, such a person would expose the difficulty in maintaining any coherence of self-identity while having inconsistencies of this stripe. An individual who wishes to be stringently disciplined will have a difficult time maintaining this identity, if the person also desires to be carefree and spontaneous. Either way, one or more identity-conferring values will have to be jettisoned if such a person is to have integrity and possess a coherent self.

⁵ See J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press: 1973), pp. 97–98.

⁶ See Gabriele Taylor, “Integrity,” *Aristotelian Society Symposia*, sup. vol. LV, 1981, p. 145.

2 Values and a Coherent Self

An account in which integrity is characterized as a matter of maintaining appropriate relations between actions and principles and among principles themselves is formalistic. We may ask whether specific values or principles are required for a general account of integrity, and what, if any, normative constraints exist. Though principles and commitments are crucial, not all values are given equal weight. An individual may give differential importance to identity-conferring commitments because there will be some commitments more relevant to the ideal person with which he identifies. George may wish to identify more with pacifism than chemistry and will place a higher premium on pacifist activities and ideals than would a typical chemist. Integrity is consistent with a hierarchy of principles to the extent that part of our value commitments and identity-conferring activities could involve our giving more weight to some principles and commitments over others. One advantage in adopting a hierarchy of principles is that it loosens the demands of consistency with respect to the many ways values may be connected. A person need not surrender her values or be seen as inconsistent when confronted with a situation that brings a set of principles into conflict, if she possesses a hierarchy of principles. Some commitments may be weighted more and thus worth holding in difficult situations, while lesser commitments may be surrendered as a situation may warrant. Surrendering some commitments over others does not alone entail the loss of integrity, because an identity-conferring set of principles can allow for this depending on the importance attached to each principle. George may continue to view himself as a pacifist and a provider for his family and still refuse the biological warfare job without losing integrity as long as his actions are consistent with his ordering of principles. It is consistent for George to place a greater emphasis on his commitment to pacifism and restrict his range of activities, while allowing leeway in the range of activities in other, less important areas. How George finally provides for his family may be less important than that he not do so in ways contrary to pacifism. Chemistry may be less important than pacifism.

Achieving or maintaining integrity is not easy. Either through a lack of sufficient skills or factors beyond his control, George might be unable to obtain gainful employment except for working on biological weapons, in which case, he would either have to accept a job contrary to his commitment to pacifism or fail to meet the requirements to provide for his family. In both cases would suffer a lack of consistency between his actions and identity-conferring principles. Although he would fail to possess integrity, it is less clear that George would be subject to moral reproach in either case. We could imagine that he would consequently live a dissatisfied and unhappy life for either failing to provide for his family or for ignoring or suppressing his commitment to pacifism without judging that he has done anything immoral. Reasonable people may disagree about the obligations of moral agents toward pacifism that would exculpate George of wrongdoing or hold that a strong commitment toward pacifism mitigates a failure of George in meeting his responsibility to provide for his family. In failing to possess or maintain a coherent self, George need not be morally blameworthy.

Identity-conferring commitments, however, are not restricted only to moral principles. Commitments that count toward the constitution of a self may be as wide-ranging as the depth of character an individual wishes to develop. The more complex a self, the greater number of activities and commitments a person might adopt. John may wish to be considerate, caring, and sympathetic, but he may also wish to be well-read, worldly, and a good cook. Activities that embody these ideals are relevant to his self-identity, as are activities that are typically considered to reflect moral principles. Such principles will be situated in a hierarchy of importance based on his preferences, but they nonetheless are pertinent to who John is. Commitments and activities only have as much weight as John gives them, but they still are constitutive of his self-identity. Moral principles are a factor in self-identity insofar as moral concerns are significant. Morality, by and large, encompasses considerations of principles and actions that are important for self-constitution, but we must recognize that a self may also be constituted by other identity-conferring commitments.

Allegiance to any particular moral principle, however, is not necessary for a person to possess integrity in the sense that two persons may profess or uphold contradictory moral principles, yet both possess a coherent self. We can imagine two politicians who share important characteristics for integrity, such as being honest in dealings with others, being respected by colleagues and constituents alike, and being willing to make difficult decisions to uphold values and principles, but where one of the politicians is deeply committed on moral grounds to passing legislation allowing euthanasia, while the other politician is equally committed on moral grounds to preventing any legislation allowing euthanasia. Absent any other relevant difference, it is not clear that either stance toward the morality of euthanasia is sufficient to deny ascriptions of integrity, especially where there is reasonable disagreement about such issues. On the account of integrity we are considering, there is nothing contradictory in judging both politicians to be persons of integrity despite their fundamental moral disagreement. What would matter would be if either politician acted in ways, publicly or privately, contrary to his principles, suggesting that the locus of judgment has more to do with consistency between action and principles than with the content of identity-conferring commitments.

3 Social Dimensions of a Coherent Self

An individual is situated in a context that is inherently social, because we always exist in relation to other people and act primarily in public settings. We have relationships with other people that affect our outlook on life and our conception of who we are. We are siblings, friends, co-workers, and mentors. We interact with other persons on different levels and partly form our identity within such social settings. But more generally, we react to ways in which others treat us and form opinions of ourselves in response. Others reflect our self-conception in the sense that they either validate or disconfirm the view we hold of ourselves. Moreover, through the manner in which we treat others, we indicate something about the type of person we are because many of our principles and ideals are put into action through our

engagements with other persons. A person may wish to be a compassionate but may only be compassionate in treating others in a certain way. Inconsistencies between actions and ideals are often manifested through our interactions with other persons. Many of the principles we adopt as constitutive of our self-identity are often formed within a social setting and carry social implications, whether to promote social harmony or to attach social status or recognition to desirable commitments and actions. Furthermore, the range of options is to a large extent already given by a particular cultural setting. In one culture obedience and loyalty to authority may be valued, while in another autonomy and independence may be valued. As an individual is reared within a particular social setting, cultural values will be promoted and reinforced through social institutions and through opinions of others. A person would be hard-pressed to reject them without experiencing some difficulty and pressure, although such rejection can occur. It would be nearly impossible for an individual or a group of individuals, for example, to adopt a system of bigamy in most industrialized nations because social contexts place restraints on what values are acceptable and are codified in law. Certain principles are other-oriented insofar as they direct our attitudes and actions toward others. Compassion is an example of an other-oriented principle, since in feeling with others, we are directed toward the welfare of other persons and act appropriately. In general, moral principles inform proper behavior and considerations of how actions affect other people, and many of our moral standards, like prohibitions against stealing, involve considerations of the welfare of others.

It might be objected that because of the conservative nature of moral principles within social contexts, we cannot account for social opposition, for example, resistance against Hitler in Nazi Germany, but this objection fails for two reasons. There might be constraints on the range of possible principles and ideals that a person may adopt within a social context, but this alone does not entail that adopting other, less dominant values is impossible. Due to domineering social pressures it is extremely difficult for individuals to adopt alternative principles, as the instances of people who did resist Hitler suggests. Social contexts in which persons are situated, moreover, are not always homogeneous with respect to values and practices, since any number of principles and ideals might be acceptable, even principles that are at odds with one another, and a variety of interpretations of widely held principles and ideals might prevail in any given community. Although many people agree on upholding principles, disagreement about how to interpret and practice the principles nonetheless exists. Social dissidents, therefore, might be viewed as a subset of individuals within a wider social context, whose principles, though at odds with the dominant view, are no less principles of the social setting.

4 Integrity and Virtue

Many philosophers view integrity as a second-order virtue or meta-virtue.⁷ If a second-order virtue is understood to be a virtue, an excellence or disposition, that

⁷ See, *ibid.*, pp. 156–157; see also McFall, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

someone possesses in reference to other virtues, then integrity qualifies as a second-order virtue. Both Taylor and McFall argue that integrity should be understood as a second-order virtue because an agent cannot act with integrity as the sole object of her concern, since by itself such a concern is vacuous. An agent does not act in order to have integrity but possesses special concern about first-order principles and acts in order to affirm such principles in a consistent and coherent way. Thus, integrity occupies “a peculiar position *vis-a-vis* other commitments and [is] isolated from them.”⁸ But if a second-order virtue is understood to be a property ascribed to a set of virtues, then it is not apparent that integrity qualifies as a second-order virtue, because this understanding would capture only one aspect of integrity, the requirement of coherence. Integrity is not simply a requirement that a set of principles and commitments be integrated into a coherent whole, but also that an agent act in a way that is consistent with such values. In this sense, integrity is not simply a property or quality of the virtues, but includes an implicit reference to the agent herself.

If we accept the requirement of consistency, two virtues are necessary, courage and honesty. A person must have the courage of conviction when acting with integrity to remain consistent with his ideals and principles and act accordingly when there are pressures or dangers that might compel him otherwise. George must possess some courage to turn down the job offer and risk some uncertainty about his career and the well being of his family. His convictions about biological warfare cannot be empty intellectual convictions or based only in principle, but he must reflect a willingness to act from his convictions when warranted. Thus, some amount of courage is needed.

To possess integrity, an individual needs to honestly account for past experiences as constitutive parts of her self-identity. To maintain a coherent self through time, an individual must take responsibility for past actions and recognize the actions as something that requires improvement, change, or continuation. The past is as important to a coherent self as the present and future, and honesty about the future is crucial. Intentions and goals must be considered as part of an adopted set of principles or identity-conferring commitments. George had to be honest about whether accepting a job in biological warfare would accord with his ideal self. He could not refuse to deliberate about possible consequences of future actions and remain willfully blind to the outcomes, and to maintain an integrated self, George had to be honest about his future intentions and choose from possible courses of actions appropriately.

An individual also must be honest with respect to the identify-conferring principles and ideals she has chosen by examining whether disparate identity-conferring commitments are coherent. For different ideals and principles to be consistent a person must be honest and reflective about the mutual compatibility and respective implications of the principles. For identity-conferring commitments to be coherent, a person must be intellectually honest and critical about ramifications of different principles. Inasmuch as a self stands in relation to other selves, it is also important that a person act toward others in a way that is consistent with an ideal

⁸ Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–157.

self she wishes to embody. We must treat others honestly by disclosing our self to others in a way that is genuine. To present a different public persona than what we hold to be our true or inner self is to fragment our identities. A public persona is requisite for identity, and to be duplicitous is not to have an integrated self, a self that is consistent and coherent. It is as important for the person we are publicly to be consistent with our own view of self-identity as it is for our actions to be consistent with our values. It would be incoherent for an individual to try to appear as a callous and indifferent person and still view herself as caring and sympathetic.

Although he offers an account of integrity that is too thin and overstates the moral hazards of common accounts of integrity, Greg Scherkoske captures another sense in which honesty is constitutive of integrity in arguing that it is to be understood as an epistemic virtue. Scherkoske contrasts the notion of integrity as an epistemic virtue with a characterization of integrity as a loyalty-exhibiting virtue and argues that his account is free from blind allegiance to particular beliefs and values that characterize common views of integrity. Integrity, viewed as an epistemic virtue, should be understood as “a complex set of dispositions that reliably and non-accidentally place their possessor in a good epistemic position.”⁹ By not associating integrity with ideals such as unity or coherence, Scherkoske advances a formalistic view of integrity in the sense that “exhibiting integrity involves a commitment to the *activity* of having the sort of judgment worth adhering to, rather than to any particular *content* of that judgment,” which is free from moral dangers that accompany “unconditional identity-conferring commitments.”¹⁰

In developing his account, Scherkoske highlights epistemic dimensions of integrity, which are related to the principle of honesty, but fails to acknowledge the performative requirements for ascribing integrity to individuals. Indeed, he explicitly denies any performative requirements when he claims, “integrity is an excellence of persons *qua* epistemic agents” that “requires a steadfast adherence that supports going to the wall for one’s convictions.”¹¹ The implication, however, is that going to the wall is not required. By omitting any performative requirements of integrity, Scherkoske fails to capture an important aspect of why individuals who exhibit integrity are praiseworthy. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Abraham Lincoln are taken to present us with canonical images of integrity, not because of any “supererogatory loyalty to moral values,” as Scherkoske would have it, but because they not only had proper regard for their best judgment but also had courage to act upon their convictions.¹² Were Rosa Parks to decide at the last minute to move to the rear of the bus out of fear or in betrayal to her cause, our estimation of her as a person of integrity would alter however admirable her processes for arriving at her convictions might be. Scherkoske underscores the point that persons of integrity act on good reasons that are subject to revision, but in omitting any

⁹ Greg Scherkoske, “Integrity and Moral Danger,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 40, no. 3, September 2010, p. 354.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 357–358 & 355.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 357 & 355.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 353.

performative requirement, his notion of integrity understood only as an epistemic virtue is insufficient.

5 Value of Integrity

An important aspect of integrity is that possessing an integrated self will promote psychological well-being to the extent that having a well-ordered set of principles and ideals helps to minimize potential for inner-conflict. A person of integrity will not often face dilemmas with regard to moral problems, because the interrelationships among disparate commitments will be resolved and potential conflict will be minimized. A self that is whole and integrated will possess a certain harmony and will not come into conflict as often as an incoherent self that has inconsistent identity-conferring commitments. Consistency between action and principle also will contribute toward happiness. If an individual truly values certain ideals, she will want to affirm the ideals through action, but if she fails to act in a manner consistent with her principles, then she will probably be ill at ease with herself. Feelings of failure, fraudulence, or impotence may cloud her view of herself if she continues to act inconsistently. We are familiar with the sense of shame and guilt accompanying continued failure to live up to ideals and principles. If John has committed himself to living a healthier lifestyle by exercising more and by eating better but repeatedly misses workouts at the gym and subsists on candy bars, he will either have to surrender his commitments or engage in some sort of self-deception, or, if he is honest, he will become dissatisfied with himself and fragmented.

Having an integrated self also matters because integrity is important. Possessing coherent goals and principles adds a sense of purpose to life. We invest something of ourselves in the principles we affirm and in so doing become self-directed. We possess integrity to the extent that we lessen the degree to which we are mere products of happenstance. An agent who spends very little thought on the type of person she wishes to become and the kinds of principles she wants to embody will lack a determinate basis for acting. Identifying with a coherent set of identity-conferring principles helps to focus the range of actions and goals that are permissible. An agent already has thought through, to some degree, what actions are required and what actions are to be avoided. Furthermore, acting in a manner consistent with the principles increases our power over circumstances insofar as we may act with determination.

It might be objected that an account of integrity that requires consistency and coherence leaves us with a bar that is set too high. In failing to act, an agent would demonstrate a lack of consistency between action and principle and therefore a lack of integrity. Many fair-minded persons have treated others on occasion unfairly, and struggles to maintain high standards and live up to personal goals and aspirations are common. Mere failure to act in accord with principles is not sufficient to deny an ascription of integrity. Because of what is required in maintaining a coherent self through time, integrity is not something that is achieved at a single point, as is the case in winning a race. It is not a steady state. Because of its relation to the constitution of a self, ongoing effort is required. The difference between a hypocrite

and a person of integrity lies not with a failure of performance, but in attitudes and reactions each person has toward the failures. A hypocrite refuses to take responsibility or acknowledge the failures and may take action to obscure them from others or even herself. In contrast, a person of integrity will account for the failures by honestly acknowledging their reality and seeking ways to remedy them in the future. In this sense, there is an element of accountability and a difference in attitude toward commitments and actions in a person of integrity that is absent in a hypocrite. In being accountable for her actions, a person of integrity expresses a second-order disposition about her beliefs, actions, and principles that is largely absent from a hypocrite or a self-deceived person but is one hallmark of an integrated self.¹³

¹³ I wish to thank audiences at St. Louis University and The University of Texas at Austin, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Thomas Magnell, and the three anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions for improving previous versions of this article. I also wish to thank Clancy Martin and Tara Smith for their written feedback and comments.